

Pro-Navy feeling remains

Va. Beach residents hold no grudge after Friday's jet crash

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The Associated Press

VIRGINIA BEACH — Virginia's most populous city has long had a love affair with the military, and several people left homeless after a fighter jet leveled their apartments say the crash won't change that.

They're accustomed to seeing sailors in their dress blues and whites around town, hulking Navy ships on the horizon and hearing the roar of jet engines overhead. They know such a crash is always a possibility. But it's hard to hold a grudge against the city's largest employer.

"They're a huge part of the community. They're everywhere," said city of Virginia Beach spokesman Marc Davis. "They're our friends, they're our neighbors, they're our Little League coaches, their children go to Virginia Beach public schools. Navy wives and husbands are in the community doing volunteer work. ... There's

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no such thing as a 'them and us.'" Dozens of apartment units were destroyed when the F/A-18D Hornet careened into the Mayfair Mews apartment complex, but no one died — a fact local and Navy officials heralded as miraculous. Both pilots ejected before impact and survived, and the Navy is now investigating exactly what happened. Officials have said the jet suffered a massive mechanical malfunction soon after taking off Friday from nearby Naval Air Station Oceana.

Some residents said they've known for some time that such a crash was a possibility. Jets frequently zoom overhead on training missions — the fighter that crashed Friday was piloted by a less-experienced aviator and his highly skilled trainer, according to the Navy — sometimes near densely populated neighborhoods.

Jeff Swoope, 55, was one of about two dozen apartment residents who had to find shelter at a hotel provided by the Red Cross. Still, he's not soured on the military, which he said has been a good neighbor.

"I moved there after the base was there," he said. "If jets really bother you, you don't have to live there."

Virginia Beach and the Hampton Roads area have long had a symbiotic relationship with the military. In addition to Oceana and its ever-present fighter jets thundering overhead, the region also is home to the world's largest naval base in Norfolk and Langley Air Force Base, among numerous others.

Oceana is Virginia Beach's largest employer, and the Navy alone has more than 120,000 military and civilian employees in Hampton Roads. The Navy Region Mid-Atlantic reported the 2010 economic impact for the region was \$13.9 billion, with more than 80 ships and 500 aircraft housed here.

Virginia officials fought to keep Oceana as the East Coast's master jet base in 2005, when the Pentagon considered closing it because of increasing development nearby. The city and state pledged to commit \$15 million per year to stop development around the base, gobbling up hundreds of acres to ease encroachment.

Additionally, the Navy has developed maps of zones where crashes could occur to help local governments limit growth there, part of an ongoing effort to increase cooperation between military and local officials.

Both plan, train and prepare together for possible emergencies, including simulated crashes, said Davis, the Virginia Beach spokesman.

That cooperation also was evident on Friday: It was residents, not emergency officials or sailors, who pulled the two aviators to safety away from the flames.

The crash site was not in an area deemed most at risk of a crash and was not designated to be acquired as an Oceana buffer zone in the encroachment- prevention plan, according to The Virginian- Pilot.

Virginia Beach EMS Division Chief Bruce Nedelka said he's sure some will seize on the encroachment issue or blame the Navy for the damage, but he believes the crash will bring the community and the military closer rather than pulling them apart.

"Together we've built this community," he said. "The strength of the military and the Navy is in large part because of its presence in Virginia Beach and the Tidewater area."



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Workers removed protective suits as they left the Mayfair Mews apartment complex on Sunday in Virginia Beach. Dozens of apartment units were destroyed when a Navy jet careened into the complex on Friday, but no one died in the crash